

Psalm 90

With the winding-down of the Summer Season, the shortening of the days and the softening of the weather, there comes a keen sense of the passage of time for those old enough and wise enough to take notice. If summertime is fleeting then so is life. I have often thought that if I could put a grappling hook in summer and hold it fast for another month, I would do so. But, of course, this is not within my power and it is an attitude that attributes too much power to the season to render life meaningful.

As I compose this reflection I have been contemplating saints from antiquity whose lives must have been radically different than mine. As modern, 21st century people, we have so many more things upon which to pin our hopes and so much more time to indulge distractions, amusements and trivial things. Can we even begin to imagine the sort of life that is a constant struggle for mere survival? Can we comprehend an existence that is one-failed-crop-removed from famine? Is it possible to think of living in a society where a fever or a case of appendicitis is a death sentence . . . wherein there is no doctor or hospital to fix us when we are broken?

The wheelbarrow full of little “hopes” we have were not available to the ancients. And, perhaps because of this, they were much more focused on big “Hope.” In Psalm 90 I find a sober expression of this:

*You sweep men away like a dream, like grass
which springs up in the morning.
In the morning it springs up and flowers
by evening it withers and fades.*

*Our life is over like a sigh.
Our span is seventy years or eighty for those who
are strong.
And most of these are emptiness and pain
they past swiftly and we are gone.*

*Make us know the shortness of our life
that we may gain wisdom of heart*

As moderns we might appeal to the sentiments of this Psalm only after having exhausted all those other “hopes” . . . hopes for a cure, for recovery, for

a little more time, and so forth. The ancients didn’t have this vast array of “hopes:” They didn’t have much in the way of medicines, surgeries, labor-saving-technologies, etc. We tend to look upon these people as primitive, superstitious, and unenlightened. Yet, if any modicum of faith is in play, we all, ultimately, arrive at the realization expressed in Psalm 90.

Of course, this psalm does not contain a full Christian perspective on life. It only proposes the wisdom of acknowledging the fleeting nature of our existence so that one may live life fully according to God’s intentions. In part, it may be a message not to squander the time one has and to live so as to leave one’s “mark” on the world, through offspring and an honorable memory.

However, beneath the surface of the words, one can detect a wistful sense that our capacity to recognize our very-temporary existence in contrast to God’s everlasting-ness, (“*from everlasting to everlasting you are God!*”), must mean something. The fact that this almighty God has condescended to reveal himself to us mortals suggests some share in his life.

I will admit that this may be my own projection upon the Psalm and asking too much of it. But the human ability to conceive of God unbound by time and limitation implies a capacity for self-transcendence.



Nevertheless, Psalm 90 does not lose any of its significance in the modern context. If anything, it is all the more important to seek this wisdom. Too many small “hopes” delude us into a false sense of security about tomorrow. Our Hope is in the Lord, who made Heaven and earth.